Principals learn about gangs, catastrophes

A federal prosecutor dispels myths about gangs for Providence school principals.

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PROVIDENCE -- The names scroll down the page as a blues-inspired dirge plays in the background.

Nov. 2, 1994 -- Derrick Barnes, 27.

Dec. 7, 2001 -- Andre "Bucky" Williams, 25.

Sept. 13, 2003 -- Carlos Mendoza, 23.

Some of the names are familiar: Jennifer Rivera, Sgt. Cornel Young Jr. and Sgt. Steven Shaw. It takes four and half minutes for the names to roll on the video, which looks like the closing credits of a movie: date of death, name, age; date of death, name, age.

"What do these names have in common?" Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Rose asks a room full of Providence school principals. "They are all victims of a shooting or a stabbing. They all were under 30 years old. And they all lived in Providence."

Rose, the anti-gang coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's office, takes his hour-long rap on the road. He says he will do anything it takes to prevent another name from being added to the roll call of victims.

Yesterday, he gave an abbreviated version of his presentation during the first day of a retreat for principals, held at Lombardi's 1025 Club in Johnston.

"What's the biggest myth about belonging to a gang?" he says. "That you make a lot of money.

"You think that 20 pairs of Nikes is living large? I can drive downtown and put that on my credit card and that's your dream?

"What do drug dealers drive on the weekend?" Rose asks. "A rental car."

"And what do they drive during the week?"

A photograph of a RIPTA bus pops up on the screen.

As the adults laugh, Rose interrupts them, "Yeah, that would be hilarious if there weren't 145 names on the roll."

He continues with his speech: "Who wants to die for a place called Clown Town? Who wants to die for the Reds or the Blues?" -- a reference to two notorious gangs, the Crips and the Bloods.

Images of "blood graffiti" appear on the screen. Students immediately know what the insignias mean; it's the adults who are often clueless.

Gangs, Rose says, are clustered in the West End and Smith Hill. In the West End alone, there are 9 gang members for every 1,000 residents. And at least 14 gangs are operating in Providence, in middle and high schools.

Rose shows graphic photographs of teenagers bleeding on the sidewalk or shot in the forehead. He shows the filthy, cramped rooms where drug dealers live. This is a take-no-prisoners approach to gang violence.

"Fed time is ugly," he says. "Imagine being locked up in a teacher's bathroom. Add a mattress. Someone takes you outside for two hours a day. That's Day One. You have 14 years and 364 days left."

Rose wraps up with role models named by students, typically rap stars or sports heroes. Then he flashes another set of faces on the screen, leaders such as Supt. Donnie Evans, Brown University President Ruth Simmons and Keeva Terry, a Classical High School graduate who is a law professor at Roger Williams University.

Earlier, the principals heard what happens when they are unprepared for a catastrophe such as the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo. On April 20, 1999, two students killed 12 students and a teacher and wounded 24 others before committing suicide; the deadliest school shooting in United States history.

Bill Pessemier, the former Littleton fire chief, described how communications between police and rescue personnel broke down after cell lines were overloaded. The paramedics and EMTs stationed in front of the school had no idea that two students had been killed and six seriously injured in the back of the building.

"We had a very severe problem," he said. "We were flooded by resources and we lost control."

At Columbine, there were three separate commands -- police, fire and schools -- and none was communicating with each other. The fire department wound up using runners to deliver messages to the local and state police.

"We had never planned for an operation of this size," Pessemier said. "These are the same problems that occurred during 9/11 and [Hurricane] Katrina."

What did Columbine teach the first responders? The need for a unified command and a regional response plan that includes all of the major players.

Public safety agencies often think that technology will compensate for a lack of planning, but that isn't true, said Pessemier, who visits schools around the country for the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

Finally, agencies have to put aside turf differences in order to work together and improvise if necessary. At Columbine, the police took over the role of the EMTs because they could get to the injured immediately.

The Providence schools already a district plan that involves the police and fire departments, according to Andre Thibeault, the director of operations.

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